

Avid Fan

And black vinyl, too. Review by Chris Beeching

Avid Acutus turntable: \$10,000. Distributed by
~~Immersion Audio Imports, 102 West Fifth Ave,~~
~~Kenosha, WI, TEL: 259-1111, (414) 391-0707.~~
www.avidhifi.co.uk

It's a shame that, in many respects, turntable design is constrained within such close parameters: There is little to carry forward from the "spinning disc with contact arm" principle...

As a result, many turntable designs look incredibly similar, and this leads to the assumption—often quite wrong—that the actual design and the performance characteristics will be similar as well.

Englishman Conrad Mas developed his Acutus turntable some ten years ago. It does appear to have some similarities with certain other top-notch players, but I've come to believe that the main secret of its superb performance is in the painstaking attention to detail—not to mention overall fit and finish—with which Mas carries out some now-familiar solutions to the problems of vinyl replay.

The turntable itself stands on three relatively massive support towers, each housing a suspension spring and the location points for movement-damping O-rings. It appears that there is a fourth tower, but in fact this is the motor unit, cunningly concealed beneath the main platter—which is itself a 10kg aluminum billet, dynamically and statically balanced.

The main bearing is a mighty affair. A 16mm stainless steel spindle is fitted with a tungsten carbide tip, and comes into contact with a sapphire thrust pad in this inverted design.

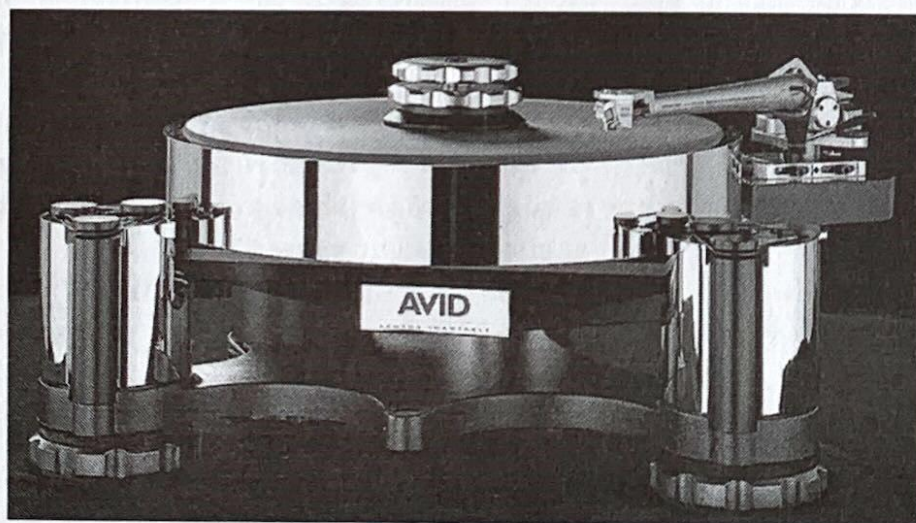
The cast-aluminum subchassis is deceptively light for its size, yet this has been specially designed to reduce the reflections of vibration and

resonances originating from external influences or the act of playing a record itself. The interfaces—where the armboard and main bearing are attached—have received special attention to ensure that the arm and platter remain interference-free. Effectively, the unit is a carefully designed network of mechanical "diodes" which allow energy transfer in one direction only, to preserve the integrity of the signal the stylus reads from the groove wall. The record/platter interface has also been addressed, and a complex polymer top coat ensures good mechanical connection between the two, further enhanced by a two-handed clamp system.

The last element to this design is the power supply for the motor: a split-phase, quartz-locked design, which endows the hand-built, high-torque (14 times more powerful than an Airpax!) low-noise AC synchronous motor with a high starting torque and almost no cogging. The drive belt has a round cross-section, intended to eliminate the twisting and "scrubbing" that Mas says a flat belt would exhibit as the platter moves on its suspension, thus ensuring constant rotation speed.

Setting up the turntable is particularly easy, made all more so by the ingenious way the platter and subchassis assembly can be lifted off the main chassis for arm fitting and cartridge alignment. At present each subchassis comes with the option of an SME or Linn arm opening as part of the casting, but an exchange system is in place (for a modest shipping fee), so if you change your tonearm to something else you can swap your subchassis for the appropriate one.

Visually the turntable is a striking piece of engineering. It's available in a number of finishes, and the review sample was supplied in a burnished



chrome. Sitting on my usual Elemental stand, it offered a visually stunning addendum to my otherwise visually nondescript hi-fi system.

The review sample came without an arm but with an SME fitting, so I could install my own Series V, itself fitted variously with Shure, Clearaudio, and Denon cartridges. The qualities of the SME are renowned, so I'm confident in suggesting that any variation in the performance was down to the cartridges—and, of course, despite the cartridges' sometimes-obvious differences, certain qualities came through which were clearly attributable to the turntable. That's why we're here, isn't it...?

Immediately obvious was the absolute stability of the musical material. The size of the acoustic; the integrity and inter-relationship of pitches; and the stereo image were all clearly and sharply defined, just as in real life. Somehow the Avid seemed to offer an authority of presentation, which not even CD managed. I still don't believe in "pinpoint" imaging, but the Acutus provided a real illusion of the presence of a performer, both in spatial terms and in musical terms. Singers, particularly solo performers, were very well focused, and behind and around them, the band (whether rock, jazz, or classical) was clearly laid out. Each was in "his" space, and the relative prominence of the performance of each was as in a live venue. There has been so much written about bringing the performer into the room that it has suffered overkill, but this turntable transports the listener to the recording environment and—depending on the quality of the pressing and production—lays bare everything that transpired.

However, this is not at the expense of the "musicality" angle. While it may be called "accurate," this turntable is definitively NOT sterile. It is lucid, poised, and refined.

The second most noticeable attribute the turntable exhibited was a very much lower degree of surface noise than I had experienced before—completely independent of which cartridge was fitted (all three having different stylus profiles). This would seem to suggest that to a greater or lesser extent, surface noise is a function of influences from outside the turntable replay system (the record surface/stylus/cartridge/arm/subchassis/bearing/platter/mat loop).

Later experiments with other turntables confirmed this. In a crude test—actually grip-

ping a part of the closed loop (the subchassis) while an unmodulated groove was being played—I found that it was easy to effect changes to the perceived noise, with such outside interference generally making it worse. So it would seem that the Avid player's suspension system, and perhaps most especially the careful attention to interfaces within that system, were very effective in allowing the stylus to retrieve only what was wanted (*i.e.*, musical) information, and that the noise we usually associate with vinyl replay leads to some extent to the "smearing" or "imprecision" of the information. The Acutus, it seemed, knew how to disengage itself from the outside world, Marlene Dietrich-like.

Tonally, the Avid had no obvious flaws at all. Its presentation was essentially neutral, though with one surprise: the depth of its lower registers. This was quite noticeable on recordings with discrete very-low frequencies. I do not mean the "obvious" lows of an organ recording, but the low-frequency characteristic of a large recording space, such as a large concert hall or cathedral. Because the bottom end was so clean, the mid/low bass was also far more articulate and musical, and you could easily differentiate between performed low bass/harmonics and the resonance or reverberation characteristic of the recording venue. Inevitably, organ recordings fared and benefited greatly from this clarity and extension, but it was also of benefit to simply recorded vocal or instrumental material, where a real sense of the recording venue came across quite disarmingly.

The Avid Acutus is a performance package that offers what I consider the most complete and thoroughly integrated solution to quality vinyl replay. It will inevitably reveal the shortcomings in the arm and cartridge chosen, and most likely will show up any shortcoming in the amplification and speaker system. Whether it is the ultimate, "last word" in vinyl replay, I'm not sure, but it certainly carves a niche at its price—and with continuing refinement from its designer...well, who knows how much closer to the original we might yet get?

If a mere (!) \$10,000 is your budget for perhaps the ultimate vinyl replay system, the Avid has to be heard!

Quality: ★★★★★

Value: Ⓢ-1/4